

The After-Earth Chronicles

by L'Angel

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Summary: The Yeerks have won, but the Andalites have rescued Ax and the Animorphs . . .

1. Part One: The Defeat

****The After-Earth Chronicles****

****_The Defeat_****

****Chapter One -- Aximili****

I stood at the window in the small room my human friends and I occupied and watched Earth recede. The Andalite Dome ship we were on was retreating. As I stared, the Blade ship of Visser Three - I mean Visser One - appeared, but didn't fire at us. It didn't need to. We were defeated. The Yeerks had won.

My name is Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill. I am an Andalite aristh. Or at least, I was. I'm not sure what I am now.

For five long years, I lived on the planet Earth and fought the Yeerks with my human friends - Prince Jake, Cassie, Rachel, Marco, and Tobias. We fought long and hard, but the six of us weren't enough. The other Andalites arrived too late to save Earth, but they managed to rescue us in time. We would escape the fate of so many humans - infestation with a Yeerk and a lifetime of enslavement. I turned away from the window. Earth was no longer visible.

The room we were in was small. There was no "furniture," as the humans would say, nothing on the walls. I had spoken with the captain earlier, and he had said that they were trying to find adequate quarters for us.

I looked at my friends. Cassie was sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall, tears streaming down her face. Tears are a human response to strong emotion - happy or sad. This time, the tears were of bitter sorrow. Prince Jake sat next to her, one hand clasping

hers. He was trying to comfort her, but Cassie was inconsolable. Rachel stood in a corner, looking more angry than sad. Rachel is a true warrior, all the way to her soul. She will most likely find a place for herself in the Andalite military, if she is allowed. She had fought our decision to leave, believing that to abandon Earth would be dishonorable. Marco had his back to me, but from the way his shoulders were moving, I guessed that he was also crying. Marco's mother had been the host body of Visser One, and she was killed in our last battle. Marco had always kept up his hope of her rescue, but now it would never come. Tobias, my shorm, is a nothlit - a person trapped in a morph. He was in his natural red-tailed hawk body, so, like me, he was incapable of tears.

"We fought the good fight," Prince Jake finally said. It startled me. No one had spoken in several hours.

^Yes,^ I agreed. ^We did all we could.^

"What do you think will happen to the Chee?" Marco asked, his voice choked.

^I - I don't know,^ I replied. I was lying. I did know, but my human friends were grieving enough for their family and friends and planet. I didn't need to add to their grief by making them realize that the Chee would most likely become the Yeerks' new death machines once they figured out how to program them. It was horrible to think of the peaceful, fun-loving androids as nothing more than killing devices, but it would probably be reality in a few weeks.

"What about the animals? And plants?" Cassie asked, her voice hollow. She knew the answer, but seemed to want it confirmed.

^The Yeerks will keep the organisms necessary for the human hosts' survival. The others will become . . . extinct. The atmosphere will be made to be that of the Yeerks' homeworld, so most of the plants will die.^ I looked away. Cassie had asked, but I wished she hadn't. She was crying again, her head on Prince Jake's shoulder.

No one spoke for a long time.

****Chapter Two -- Tobias****

My name is Tobias. No last name, but not that it matters. I was thirteen when I became an Animorph. I'm eighteen now, but I feel like I'm eighty. My human morph somehow aged with me - probably an Ellimist trick. But like I said, none of that matters. We lost. It's over. No more battles. No more fear. At the same time, no more hope for Earth. I don't know what's going to happen to us - or to me, for that matter. I know there's no point in staying in my morph-capable hawk body any longer. I could morph into my human form and be human - forever. I could be with Rachel.

I stared at her, standing in the corner. Even now, her eyes were defiant. She was so beautiful. I loved her, and wanted nothing more than to be with her. But still, some part of me resisted the thought of never morphing, never being able to fly again.

^Ax-man,^ I said, keeping the thought-speech private. ^Is there any chance that . . . that - that the Andalites could reverse . . .^ I trailed off, wanting the answer, but dreading it at the same time.

^I don't know, Tobias,^ Ax answered. ^I have been away from my people for five years. I don't know what kind of advancements have been made.^

^Oh.^ I fell silent. ^Ax?^

^Yes?^

^Are you happy to be back with other Andalites?^ It was a stupid question. Of course he was.

^Not as much as I always assumed I would be. I don't know what's going to happen - to you or the others or myself. I don't know if I will be punished for helping you and breaking the law of Seerow's Kindness. And . . . I was on Earth so long . . .^ He paused, looking like he was trying to find a way to explain. ^Cassie once gave me a book of quotes. One of them was by a man named Thomas Wolfe, I believe.^

I knew the quote he was talking about. ^'You can't go home again.'^

^Yes. It may very well be true for me. I feel very sad at the loss of Earth. It was my home for five years. And the five of you were my friends and my people.^

I was silent. I was surprised, both at his answer and his openness. Then, ^Ax, you realize that no matter what happens, even if you're punished or something, we'll stand by you, right? We would have lost Earth a long time ago without you. And even if your fellow Andalites don't recognize it, you're very much a hero.^

Ax didn't say anything for several moments. Finally, he said, ^Thank you, Tobias. That means a great deal to me.^

Suddenly, we all jerked up as a very loud thought-speech voice spoke in our heads. ^Will the five humans and aristh Aximili please report to the captain's quarters?^

"Well, Ax," Marco said shakily, trying to keep his voice from trembling, "take us to your leader."

****Chapter Three -- Jake****

Ax led us down a brightly lit hallway. On either side were neon colored lighted tubes. I remembered that Ax had said once that on Andalite ships, there are colored tubes running along the hallways, and each color leads to a different part of the ship. We walked for awhile, and then stopped in front of a door. Ax touched a gray pad, and a powerful thought-speak voice said, ^Come in.^ It was loud and commanding, but without the menacing quality of Visser Three's.

The door slid open and we stepped inside. The captain's quarters were huge, at least five times as big as the room we had been in. The captain smiled a strange Andalite smile at Ax. ^Aristh Aximili, you needn't look so terrified.^

^No - no, uh, no, Captain Kalainth. I mean, yes, War-Prince - I mean

_^

^Does he always babble like this?^ Captain Kalainth asked me, still smiling. He was the first Andalite I'd ever met who had something resembling a sense of humor.

"Always," Marco answered. The faintest ghost of a smile crossed his face.

^Ah. In that case, I may need to rethink my decision to recommend to the Council that you be made a full warrior,^ Kalainth said sternly.

^What? A full warrior? I thought - I mean, I helped the humans. Gave them information. I broke the law of Seerow's Kindness. I assumed I would be punished,^ Ax stammered.

^Warrior Aximili, you did what needed to be done. From what I've heard, you endured numerous battles on an alien planet far from your home. At the very least, you will be made a warrior - if I can convince that ancient fossil, Lirem, and the rest of the Council. Don't tell him I called him that, please.^

Ax looked shocked. "Um, who's Lirem?" I asked.

^The head of the Council. Very old, very dignified, very boring. Just like the rest of our esteemed Council members.^ Kalainth had been looking at me with his stalk eyes, but now he studied me with all four of them. ^And you are 'Prince Jake,' I presume.^

"Yes - well, no. I'm not really a prince. Ax just calls me that," I answered nervously.

^I must say, yours is an unprecedented situation. From what Aximili has told me, you acted with bravery and honor throughout your ordeal, as a real Andalite prince would. The Council will have to deliberate about what should be done with you - all of you.

^Now,^ Kalainth continued, ^there is the issue of where to put you. It will be several months before we return to the Andalite homeworld. We have shuffled around some of the warriors and arists, so we have three rooms available. Will that be adequate?^

I looked around. Each of the others nodded, with the exception of Rachel, who just looked away angrily. She hadn't said one word since we boarded the Andalite Dome ship, and I was very worried about her. "Yes," I answered. "That's fine."

^Good. I will have an officer show you to your quarters. Do you have any questions?^

I noticed Tobias looking at Ax intensely. Ax appeared to listen for a second, and then said, ^War-Prince Kalainth, have there been any developments in the treatment of nothlits?^

^Unfortunately, none that I am aware of. However, I am not a member of the scientific circles, so it is possible that there have been developments that have not yet been made public.^

^Oh,^ Tobias said, his hawk's gaze flickering around the room as if

he wasn't sure where to look.

^One more thing. Warrior Aximili, I know that you want to contact your family. Unfortunately, our visual and thought-speech communication systems were damaged in a skirmish with the Yeerks. The most we can do is send a written communication to them, letting them know that you are safe.^ Ax looked disappointed, but nodded.

^All right, that is all. You are dismissed. Aristh Garruth will show you to your quarters.^ An Andalite who looked even younger than Ax appeared at the door and led us down the hall and up a drop-shaft. The three rooms were in a row. We had one bag of possessions between the six of us. We had each managed to grab a change of clothes and a picture of our families before we left. We dug our clothes out of the bag and separated.

****Chapter Four -- Tobias****

I sighed. Ax and I had been standing silently in our room for about an hour. Actually, I was in my human morph and sitting on the floor while he paced restlessly. Finally, he stopped and looked at me. ^Rachel has been very quiet,^ he commented.

"Yes," I agreed worriedly. Rachel had been almost completely silent, in fact. It was not like her.

^It would be best if you talked to her.^

"Yes," I said again. Ax and I were what he called shorm, deep friends. He knew I was worried about Rachel.

Suddenly, there was a soft knock at the door. Ax answered it, and Marco walked in. He looked exhausted. Come to think of it, so did Ax. I certainly felt exhausted. In less than twelve hours we had lost everything familiar to us. We had lost the battle for Earth, the others had left their families behind, and now we were on a space ship on our way to a strange planet with an alien species deciding our fates.

"Jake called a meeting," Marco said quietly. "The others are in Cassie and Rachel's room."

"Okay," I said, getting up. Ax and I followed Marco into the room next door. Jake was standing, leaning against the wall. Marco sat on the floor next to him. Rachel sat across from them, staring into space. Her beautiful face had finally lost its hard expression, but it looked disturbingly blank and pale. I sat on her right, and Cassie sat on her left. Ax stood by the door.

"How's everyone doing?" Jake asked. No one answered. Finally, Jake said, "Rachel, are you okay? You haven't said one word since . . . since we left."

"Am I okay?" Rachel asked evenly. She stared at Jake. "Am I okay?" Her eyes narrowed and she stood up to face him. "No, I'm not okay. Because right about now my little sisters are being dragged down that pier in the Yeerk pool. About now some Controller's shoving their heads into that sludge and while they scream and cry and beg, a filthy Yeerk slug is entering their brains and in a few seconds, they'll stop struggling, because they no longer control their own

muscles, or voices, or . . . or . . ." Rachel broke off with a sob. She was standing in the middle of the room, and she put her head in her hands and sobbed. I got up and put my arms around her.

"Rachel, everything's going to be okay," I murmured into her ear, realizing how stupid it sounded was as soon as it was out of my mouth.

"No, Tobias, it's never going to be okay. Never again," she sobbed. Her face was buried in my shoulder. I caught Jake's eye. He motioned the others out of the room so Rachel and I were alone. I pulled her down so she was sitting on the floor, cradled in my lap. She cried for about an hour, but it felt like ten. Finally, she fell asleep out of pure exhaustion. The Andalites had left a few blankets in each room, so I covered her with one and gently kissed her forehead. I quietly left the room.

****Chapter Five -- Aximili****

Life on the Dome ship slowly settled into a sort of bizarre routine for my human friends. The first week was terrible for all of us. Five years of constant fear and fighting had drained us, physically, mentally, and emotionally. But, eventually, my friends seemed to recover somewhat. I knew they would never truly stop longing or grieving for their homes and families, but they realized that they needed to move on and make something resembling a life for themselves.

Two weeks after we were rescued, I was grazing in the Dome (Andalite grass is far superior to Earth grass) when I was called to War-Prince Kalainth's quarters again.

^Hello, Warrior Aximili,^ he greeted me. How wonderful it was to hear that title! After I began breaking the law of Seerow's Kindness, I thought I would never hear it.

^Hello, Captain Kalainth,^ I replied.

^Aximili, the Council has asked me to recommend what should be done with your friends. I wanted your input on this.^

I said nothing for a full two minutes. Kalainth let me think and stared out his window at the white nothingness of Z-space. I knew what to recommend for each of my friends, but I also knew that my suggestions might not be well received. Finally, I began slowly, ^I must say that Rachel is a true warrior. She would be an asset to the Andalite army.^

War-Prince Kalainth turned around to face me. He looked a little shocked. But he responded, ^Continue, please.^

^Prince Jake was an excellent prince, especially for such a young human. If he were to be properly trained, he could become a commendable Andalite prince. And Marco,^ I continued, ^has an aptitude for computers. His father worked with them extensively on Earth. Cassie is already very skilled in treating sick creatures. She would probably make a very good physician. She should at least be trained in some sort of medical capacity.^

The captain said nothing for a few seconds. Finally he said, ^You are

suggesting very high rankings for your human friends. I don't believe that any non-Andalites have ever held such occupations on the homeworld. I, personally, feel that it might work. I have watched your friends, and listened to their stories, and they seem competent and intelligent - especially for a species as backward as humans. The Council, however, may think differently. In addition, we will have Lirem to contend with. He will most likely want to put them as far out of the way as possible.^

^But if you recommend it, won't the Council -^

^The Council is made up of old fools who do not have the slightest idea what this war is like anymore. They still hold to the traditional arrogance that we are indestructible. We are not. I can tell this is shocking for you. As an aristh you were taught to be proud of your species. As a warrior, I am telling you to face reality. There are many planets all over the galaxy just like Earth. We have lost more than we have won. But Lirem and the others on the Council don't see that - or perhaps they do not want to see that. You recommend that one of your friends be placed in the military, that one becomes a prince, that one be trained as a doctor, and that one work with computers. But all Lirem will see is that they lack fur, stalk eyes, and tails.^

I was in shock. I couldn't think. I had never heard anyone say anything disrespectful about the Council before. But here was a great War-Prince, a hero, calling the Council 'old fools.'

^Warrior Aximili,^ War-Prince Kalainth said, more gently. ^When we reach the homeworld, you and your friends will need to speak to the Council. You will need to have some idea of what to say, so I suggest you speak to your them about this as soon as possible.^

^I - I thought we weren't scheduled to arrive home for several months,^ I stammered.

^There has been a change of plans. The Council wants to speak with you and your friends as soon as possible, so we are employing a new type of Z-space travel. I was reluctant to try it because it is very new, but my scientists have assured me that it is safe. However, it may make it temporarily difficult to move about the ship, so warn the humans to stay in their quarters until the proper adjustments have been made.^

^When will we arrive?^

^I expect us to arrive in approximately one week. Do you have any other questions?^ I shook my head dazedly. ^Then you are dismissed. And Warrior Aximili? Everything I said here is to be kept confidential. Do you understand?^ I nodded. ^Good. Speak to your friends.^

I hurried back to our quarters, my ears still ringing from Captain Kalainth's words. I found the others in Prince Jake and Marco's room.

^War Prince Kalainth wanted me to warn you that we will be switching into a different type of Z-space travel that may make it difficult to move about the ship. He has asked us to stay in our quarters until further notice.^ Just then, a thought speech voice announced,

^Attention, please. We are now entering Rapid-Tunnel Z-space Travel. The captain asks that you remain in a secure room for the next hour. Thank you.^ Suddenly, there was violent jolt and I found myself lying on the floor with Rachel on top of me. She shifted off and I tried to stand. I quickly fell over.

Prince Jake struggled to sit up and fell back. "So what now? Are we just supposed to lie here for the next hour?"

The answer came quickly. ^Attention, please. The gravitational field on the ship has been disrupted. This was expected and we are attempting to correct it. Please do not attempt to stand or walk until further notice.^

"Okay," Marco said. "Anybody want to play 20 Questions?"

^Actually, there is something we need to discuss,^ I said.

^What?^ Tobias asked. He was lying next to Rachel with his wings spread out. He was probably very uncomfortable.

^We are entering this form of Z-space travel in order to arrive home in about a week as opposed to the several months it would take in normal Z-space travel. When we arrive, the Council wants to speak to us. Captain Kalainth has asked us to try to decide what we are going to tell them.^

"Why?" Cassie asked. "Does he expect there to be a problem?"

^Possibly,^ I replied carefully. ^He does not appear to hold the Council in very high regards - and I must say that I myself am not particularly fond of Lirem. He is the one who asked me to lie and say that I gave you the morphing ability, not Elfangor.^

"Do you think you'll be punished for that?" Prince Jake asked me.

^I do not know. As War Prince Kalainth said, he is going to recommend that I be made a full warrior. But, the final decision is that of the Council's, and they are all very traditional when the laws of my people are involved. And Seerow's Kindness is one of our most important laws.^

^What will happen if you're punished?^ Tobias asked.

^When I first contacted my homeworld after I joined you in the fight on Earth, Lirem "forgave" my breaking of the law on the grounds that I was an aristh, separated from my prince, and not yet trained. But that was only for having given you the morphing ability. They may choose to punish me for giving you additional help. If they do, I will never be made a warrior. They may even strip me of my aristh title.^ I said all this as calmly as possible. I didn't want to worry them.

"That's a pretty stiff punishment," Marco commented.

^Yes,^ I agreed. ^But you must consider the reasons behind the law.^

"You don't think they'll actually do that, though, do you?" Rachel asked.

^I don't know,^ I replied honestly.

"We'll do all we can to help you out, Ax," Prince Jake reassured me.

^Thank you, but your futures are also at stake. The captain asked me to recommend a possible occupation for each of you -^

"The military," Rachel said instantly. "Just because Earth is gone doesn't mean the fight's over. I want to burn as many dirty slugs as possible."

^I expected that. I told him that you would be an asset to the Andalite military.^ Rachel smiled at me, something she rarely did. Rachel and I haven't always agreed on everything.

"What about me?" Prince Jake asked almost suspiciously.

^I told him that you were a great prince on Earth and that with proper training you would make an excellent Andalite prince.^

"Ax, I don't want to be a prince. I didn't like being your prince on Earth - no offense, it had nothing to do with you - and I don't want to be a prince now. Besides, you know they'll never allow it."

^Probably not,^ I acknowledged. ^But if they do, I would encourage you to try it.^

"Jake, Ax is right," Cassie said. "You're a natural leader and you'd be a wonderful prince." Prince Jake didn't say anything, but I could tell he was considering the idea.

^Marco, I thought you might want to be trained in computers.^

"Yeah, that'd probably be best. What with my extensive knowledge," Marco said, joking. He knew very well that his knowledge of human computers meant almost nothing. It would take years of training for him to reach a similar level with Andalite computers - or maybe it wouldn't. Humans learn very quickly.

"What'd you say about me?" Cassie asked quietly.

^I recommended that you be trained in some sort of medical field - as a physician, perhaps.^

"That might be okay," she said slowly.

We were silent for a few minutes. I stared at the ceiling as boredom began to creep in. Only twenty-five minutes had passed. Suddenly Rachel said, "What about Tobias?"

The room was silent.

Tobias laughed bitterly. ^That's okay, Ax-man.^

^I am sure the Council will be able to -^

^I said, it's okay. I mean, they have to figure out the nothlit thing at some point, right? As long as there are mice - or mice-like creatures, I guess - on your planet, I'll be fine.^ We fell silent again. I felt guilty for not having considered Tobias's future.

Suddenly, the silence was broken. "Hey, why don't you great and mighty Andalites have that whole thing figured out?" demanded Rachel, abruptly angry.

^Whole what thing?^ I asked, startled.

"The nothlit thing," she answered impatiently. "I mean come on. You'd think that if you Andalites were as great as you think you are, then you'd be able to fix something like that. Right? Right," she added answering her own question. We still couldn't stand, but she turned her head and looked at me accusingly, her blue eyes icy.

^I'm sorry. I am not a scientist,^ I replied coldly. ^If there is anything to be done, the Council will do it. I don't know if there is a solution, and if so what it is, and if not, why there isn't one. I don't know!^ I glared at Rachel for a moment and then looked back at the ceiling.

She was silent for about ten seconds, Suddenly she exploded. "I am so sick of excuses from you Andalites! That's all you ever say! And then, you turn around and think you're so great. Well, guess what!" She shoved herself up on her arm, no small feat considering the circumstances, and glared at me from above. "You're not," she whispered, her face inches from mine. "If you were, you would have saved Earth." Her voice was hard. "If you were, you wouldn't be losing to a bunch of parasitic slugs."

^Rachel, be grateful I can't move my tail,^ I said angrily. We glared at each other and spent the next thirty minutes in silence.

****Chapter Six -- Tobias****

Ax was furious at Rachel. Angrier than I had ever seen him, in fact. When he faced Visser Three and let him walk away, he had been furious with himself, but I had never seen him so mad at another person. And I felt responsible. It was Rachel's wishing for us to be together - human and together - that had brought it on.

After one of the longest half hours of my life, with us lying there, not speaking, and with so much tension you could have cut it with a knife, the gravity-whatever-you-call-it was finally fixed. Ax stood up, got off one last good glare at Rachel, and silently left. I followed him out and into our room. ^Ax -^ I started.

^Please, Tobias,^ he said, sounding like he was fighting for control. ^I know you will agree with Rachel, so, please, not now.^

^What makes you think I'm gonna take her side?^ I asked. ^Just because she's my girlfriend? Do I have to remind you that I'm practically half Andalite?^

Ax said nothing. Finally he answered, his voice strained and low, ^I simply assumed -^

^Well, don't. Actually, I think Rachel was way out of line. I would have told her so, but you were so angry that I wanted to talk to you first.^ I looked hard at him. ^This is partly my fault, you know. She wants so badly for me to be human again, so we can -^ I stopped. Ax is my best friend, but for some reason I couldn't say that to him.

^So you can be together,^ he finished. ^I know.^

^But I don't think that's all of it. Rachel took losing the war very hard. We all did, but it hit her hardest, I think. She's angry right now and she wants someone to blame. So she's blaming the Andalites and, well, you were the nearest Andalite. It's really not your fault.^

Ax didn't say anything for a minute. His back was to me, and all four of his eyes were staring at the wall, but I watched him closely.

^I realize this,^ he said quietly. ^The truth is, part of me is angry, too. Part of me wonders why they didn't reach Earth faster. And I know everyone is nervous about facing the Council - at least I am.^

^Do you really think they'll punish you?^ I asked.

^I don't know,^ he said honestly. ^War-Prince Kalainth seemed to think it was a distinct possibility. He said . . . that the Council members are very traditional. If I am stripped of my rank, I will have to find a way to make a life in a different capacity. The hardest part will be knowing that I will never be known as anything more than great Elfangor's dishonored little brother.^ He finally turned around to face me. ^Your father's shadow is very long,^ he told me, his though-speech quiet. I started a little. We had known for over three years that Elfangor was my father, but that was the first time Ax had ever called him that.

****Chapter Seven -- Aximili****

I was staring at Tobias, somehow seeing my brother in his intense hawk's gaze, when someone knocked at the door. I opened it. ^Rachel,^ I said flatly. Hardly a warm greeting, but considering what she had said earlier, she should have grateful not to have my tailblade at her throat.

"Hi, Ax," she said, barely meeting my eyes. She looked past me at Tobias. "Tobias, could I speak to Ax alone for a sec?"

^Sure,^ he replied. ^Both of you, behave,^ he ordered as he hawk walked out of the room.

"First of all, I want to say how sorry I am about what I said," Rachel began, looking at the ground. "I have no right to blame you for what's happened. You fought just as hard for Earth as the rest of us, and it wasn't even your home. But the truth is, I do sort of blame the other Andalites. I feel like they should have made Earth a higher priority."

^I feel the same way,^ I said. ^As I told Tobias, part of me blames them also.^

"But it won't help, will it?" she said. "It won't change the past."

^No,^ I agreed.

"And being angry won't help Tobias's situation either. But I still want to fight. I want to join the military. And I will find a way in," Rachel vowed. She lifted her head and looked me in the eye as she said this. "I'll find a way in," she repeated. "No matter what the Council says."

^Rachel, you have always been a true warrior. Cassie and Tobias and Marco, and even Prince Jake were forced into this fight, and so were you at first. But you are the only one who is a warrior to her soul.^

"Thanks, Ax. I really hope everything turns out all right for you."

^So do I,^ I said with a faint smile.

To be continued . . .

2. Part Two: The Homecoming

****The After-Earth Chronicles****

****_The Homecoming_****

****Chapter One -- Marco****

My name is Marco, and for the sake of tradition (and just to be contrary), I won't give you my last name. It doesn't really matter anymore though - the Yeerks have won.

I guess we fought well, but it just wasn't enough. They won. For days, that phrase spun around in head, mixing and interweaving with one other - She's dead. She - my mother, Visser One - was really gone. In the back of my mind I always fought for the day when I'd rescue her and hold her someplace for three days until the Yeerk in her head starved. Then we'd be together again. A real family, like in the days before she "died." But she was dead, and by now my dad was a Controller. So it would never happen.

Gee, Marco, you're probably saying. Where're the jokes? And the sarcasm?

Sometimes there's nothing to be funny about. Once we left Earth on the Andalite Dome ship, I occasionally cracked a joke to help bring some sort of normalcy to my friends' screwed up lives, but my heart was never in it.

And then there were the nightmares.

I'd had lots of nightmares over the last five years - all of us had. Nightmares about stuff you wouldn't believe. Nightmares that made me

wake up screaming in a cold sweat with the sheets soaked through. And after we left, I think they got worse for all of us. There were mornings when even Ax looked like he'd only slept for about ten minutes. But these nightmares were different from any I'd ever had before.

I was usually asleep - and I know you're thinking, Well, yeah, wouldn't you be? But sometimes I'd just be sitting there and suddenly I'd be trapped in this nightmare, watching the scene from a third person point of view, and I'd start crying but I couldn't "wake up" until it was done. But that only happened two or three times, and only when I was alone, so mostly I just tried to stay with the others as much as possible.

But whether I was awake or asleep, the nightmare was always the same.

I was in the Yeerk pool - only I wasn't me. I was watching me, watching everything happen, powerless to move or do anything to stop it.

It was our last battle. We knew it was going to be our last battle. The Yeerks had pretty much won by then, and Ax had received a thought-speak message the day before that the Andalites would reach Earth the next day - not to fight, but to rescue us. But we wanted . . . well, to tell you the truth, I don't really know what we wanted. Maybe just to do some damage to the Yeerks one last time, before we had to leave. And we knew we had to leave. That decision had been made after Ax received the Andalites' message. But some of us had personal scores to settle. I wanted one chance to free my mother, even if it was only for a few minutes, just long enough to tell her I loved her and promise her we'd free everyone someday. Ax wanted one last shot at Visser Three. Jake wanted basically the same thing I did - to free his brother, Tom, for just a few minutes. And Rachel was angry at us for voting to leave, and I think she just wanted to kill a few more Yeerks before we left - before we 'abandoned Earth,' as she put it.

So we went to the Yeerk pool for the last time.

We found the latest Pool entrance - 2nd floor, Ladies Apparel, Macy's dressing room. We morphed flies and hid in the dressing room until a woman came in with a purse. While she was opening the door to the Pool we crawled in her bag and hoped the Gleet Bio-Filters that were in place in every Pool entrance wouldn't fry us. They didn't. I wasn't sure whether I was happy about that or not.

Once we were inside we demorphed and remorphed into our battle morphs in an empty side room. For once, we had no special plan - just attack. We were defeated and facing the loss of everything we'd ever loved. I'm not sure any of us (except maybe Ax) cared whether or not we got out of there alive.

In my dreams, I watched the scene unfold. I was a gorilla, my favorite morph, and I watched myself swing a huge fist at a Hork Bajir. He went down hard and stayed down.

I was aiming another blow at another Hork Bajir when I saw her.

She was in one of the cages used for involuntary hosts, screaming her

lungs out. She was alternately cussing out Visser Three and cheering us on.

I knew it was stupid. We had purposely walked into a fight we couldn't win and I knew we would need everyone to get out.

But my mom came first.

I slugged the three Hork Bajir guarding her cage. One of them sliced my back pretty good before I knocked him out, but I barely felt the pain. I yanked the lock off her cage - it was just a padlock, no combination, nothing hi-tech. Child's play for a gorilla. ^Go!^ I told her frantically. Dracon beams were beginning to fire as the Yeerks finally got it together enough to fight back. ^Get to safety. Now!^ She didn't argue and disappeared down a corridor just as another walking salad shooter jumped on my back. I turned around and fought as hard as I could for the next ten minutes. Finally, Jake gave the order to retreat, and we pulled back. One by one we managed to make it to one of the drop-shafts.

I was the last one out. Cassie had gone only seconds before me and was waiting when I emerged. Four human Controller guards were unconscious on the floor of the building we were in.

"The others all made it," she told me, as I demorphed in the next room. "I don't know how, but we all made it out alive. They're waiting outside."

^Gre - ^ I started to say, but I crossed the line between thought-speech and spoken speech and couldn't finish. I started to walk outside, but Cassie stopped me.

"Marco," she said gently. "Your mom . . ." She didn't finish. She didn't need to.

"Oh, no," I moaned. I began gasping for air, like I couldn't breathe. My chest felt tight, and there was ice water in my stomach. Cassie took my hand and led me outside.

The others were waiting in an alley. Ax and Tobias were in their human morphs, and Rachel and Jake were themselves. Jake was sitting on the ground with a still human form in his lap.

"Mom . . ." I gasped. She turned her head. She wasn't dead. Yet.

"She was hit with a Dracon beam," Cassie whispered to me. I almost didn't hear her - in fact, it was only after having the dreams that I could recall what actually happened. I knelt next to Jake and took my mother in my arms. The others moved a few yards away to give us some privacy.

"So," she whispered weakly, shivering. "You were the 'Andalite bandits.'" She smiled, trembling. "My brave Marco." I nodded, trying not to look at the wound in her side.

"Mom, we'll get you away from here. The Andalites are coming tomorrow. They'll help you. You'll be okay," I said, desperate to believe myself.

"No, Marco. But I'll die free. I only wish . . ." She gasped in pain. "I only wish we had more time . . . and your father . . ." She trailed off.

"I love you, Mom," I sobbed.

"I love you, too," she murmured. And then she was gone. Just like that.

We hid in the woods that night and the next day, always changing morphs and keeping on the move. At midnight the following night, we met the Andalites in a clearing far from our city. We boarded their ship and left everything behind. I couldn't watch as Earth got smaller and smaller. We all felt like we were running away, but in the back of our minds we were all thinking that someday we would return - and the next time, the Yeerks wouldn't win.

****Chapter Two -- Marco****

I finally opened my eyes, tears streaming down my cheeks as I tried to stop shaking.

"Same dream?" Jake mumbled groggily.

"Yeah," I answered, breathless. I sat up, ran a hand through my hair and wiped the tears off my cheeks. Suddenly I jumped as someone knocked at the door. I got up on shaky legs and answered. It was Tobias in his human morph.

"Hi, Marco," he said. "'Morning, Jake. Ax said that we all need to meet in our room as soon as possible. We're reaching the Andalite homeworld today."

"Yeah, that's what Ax told me last night. Is he excited?" Jake asked.

"Excited, scared, nervous. I don't think he slept more than a half an hour last night, but he's bouncing off the walls."

"We'll be there," I said with a sigh.

Five minutes later we were all gathered in Tobias and Ax's room, watching an extremely hyper Andalite pace back and forth, tail twitching.

Finally, after about fifteen minutes, I just couldn't take it anymore. "Ax, stop!" I cried. "You're gonna wear a hole in the floor and drive me crazy in the process!"

"Too late," Rachel muttered, shooting a slight smile in my direction.

^I'm sorry,^ Ax apologized, sounding tense. He stopped, but his tail twitched more violently than ever. And an out-of-control Andalite tail is a very dangerous thing.

"Okay, Ax," I said after several minutes of nervously watching him - and his tail. "I've changed my mind. Pace all you want. Just get that tail under control before you impale one of us!"

^I'm very sorry, Marco,^ Ax said again. ^But I haven't seen my parents in more than six of your years. I don't know what to expect.^

"Everything's going to be fine," Cassie reassured him.

^Yes,^ he replied dubiously. ^I am sure you are correct.^

****Chapter Three -- Aximili****

I was home. I kept trying to convince myself that this was a good thing, but I was feeling apprehensive about seeing my parents. I had been waiting for this moment for a long time, and now I was worried about what was going to happen.

^Warrior Aximili,^ I heard. I turned quickly and saw the door slide open. Captain Kalainth walked in. ^Aximili, your parents are waiting at the base. You will be taken to see them.^

^Thank you, War-Prince Kalainth.^

^Unfortunately, the Council has requested that you not return home until after the hearing. You and your human friends will be given a place to stay.^

^All right,^ I agreed, trying to cover up my disappointment.

^Please remain in your quarters until you are sent for. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to be on the bridge when we dock.^

"Hearing?" Prince Jake said after Captain Kalainth had left. "Are we being charged with something?"

^I don't know,^ I answered honestly. ^I was given the impression that it would be more of a questioning.^ Suddenly, there was a jolt that knocked my friends off their feet and threw me against the wall.

"What was that?" Marco demanded.

^I think we have docked,^ I answered. We waited for several more minutes. Finally, the door slid open and an aristh appeared.

^Warrior Aximili, I am Aristh Ferran,^ he said. ^I am here to escort you and the humans onto the base.^

"The humans have names," I heard Rachel mutter.

Ferran led us down the hall and toward the front of the ship. As we got closer to the front, I heard more and more commotion - thought-speak voices shouting, cargo being unloaded, and the sound of two thousand hooves as warriors and arisths arrived home for the first time in months.

I started down the hall toward the main exit, but Ferran stopped me. ^Your parents have been taken to a separate room on the base. Captain Kalainth thought that it might be better if you were not in a crowd

of several hundred Andalites when you were reunited with them.^

^Yes,^ I agreed. I followed him down a hallway that branched off the main exit, and Prince Jake and the others followed me. I was growing more and more impatient.

After what felt like hours, Ferran led us down a separate exit off the ship and stopped in front of a gray door. ^This is the room,^ he said. He looked at me expectantly.

I was puzzled. What did he want? Suddenly, I remembered. I was a warrior now. Ferran's superior officer. ^Oh, um, Aristh Ferran, thank you. You are dismissed.^

^Thank you, Warrior Aximili,^ He trotted off down the hall.

"Well, Ax, you ready?" Prince Jake asked.

^I believe so,^ I replied, my insides churning.

"Do you want us to stay out here?" Cassie asked.

I hesitated. ^Maybe for a little while. But I want them to meet you. You were with Elfangor when he died. And Tobias . . . you and I have something very important to tell them.^

"That's for sure," Tobias agreed. My parents did not yet know that Tobias was their grandson. "Good luck, Ax-man."

^Thank you. Oh, Tobias. You should demorph. You have approximately fifteen minutes left.^

"Okay," he said, feathers already sprouting from his arms. I noticed Rachel watching him with an expression of sadness on her face.

I faced the door and took a deep breath. I touched the access pad and the door slid open.

****Chapter Four -- Aximili****

^Aximili,^ my father said, turning at the sound of the door. His voice had a strange quality to it that should have bothered me, but I was too overwhelmed by the "sound" of it in my head to notice. My mother, standing by his side, said nothing. She looked at me with all four eyes, and I could see a mix of sorrow and joy in them. Joy at seeing me after all this time. Sorrow at the realization that there should have been two sons greeting them.

I stared at my parents. Six years is a long time. I knew I had changed a great deal, physically and mentally. My parents had changed also. My father's coat was not as bright as I remembered it, and my mother's tailblade was looked dull. Normal signs of aging in Andalites, but it was a shock all the same.

^Aximili-kala,^ my mother finally said, using their special name for me. Literally, it simply means "little Aximili," so it's nothing particularly special. But after not hearing it for five years, it was like music.

^Mother,^ I whispered. ^Father . . .^ I walked forward quickly, and my mother touched her tailblade to mine, and then reached out to touch my arm. I waited for my father to do the same, and after a moment, he arched his tail forward to briefly tap mine - but he did not touch my arm. Strangely, the lack of physical affection bothered me. I suppose it was because humans use touch much more than Andalites do, and I had become accustomed to it during my time with them. My reunion with my parents seemed to be lacking something.

^I'm glad you're home, Aximili,^ my mother said. ^I have been so worried about you, all alone on that strange planet.^

^I - I was not quite alone,^ I replied.

^Ah, yes. The humans with the morphing ability. We have heard about them.^ My father looked at me. It was a look I couldn't read.

^What - what have you been told?^ I asked nervously. This was what had kept me awake all night, and made me pace and shake earlier.

^Just the very basics.^ Now I knew what my father knew. All affection was gone from his voice and my mother was watching him anxiously.

^Noorlin, please,^ my mother begged quietly. I think she had meant to exclude me from her thought-speech.

^Father, Mother, the humans are just outside. I'd like you to meet them, please.^ They knew the lie. The Council had lied to them! They had disgraced me in front of my own parents!

Shortly after I arrived on Earth, I contacted my homeworld using a high powered telescope. I spoke to Lirem, the Head of the Council, and received instructions. One instruction was to not give the humans any information or assistance that would be in violation of the law of Seerow's Kindness. I soon began breaking that law regularly.

The other instruction was to lie. My brother, Prince Elfangor, was a great hero, but as he was dying, he broke the same law I was instructed to follow. He gave my human friends the power to morph. Revealing that would have marred his name and memory in the eyes of our people, so I was asked to take the blame for Elfangor's transgression. I was shocked at the request, but I had always thought that the Council would at least have the decency to tell my parents the truth. Apparently, I was mistaken.

^Yes, ask them to come in,^ my mother said softly. My father was looking at me in a way I never thought he would have to. There was shame in his eyes. He was ashamed of me. I felt all three of my hearts break as I turned back to the door.

^Just a moment,^ I told my parents as I stepped outside.

"Well, Ax?" Prince Jake said, scrambling up from where he had been sitting on the floor. "What's up?"

I said nothing. "What's wrong?" Cassie asked. "I expected you to be ecstatic."

^Do you remember about five years ago, when I contacted my homeworld?^

"Oh, yeah," Marco said with a laugh. "You rewrote that software my dad was working on. Man, he flipped!"

I silently stared at the ground, unable to speak. Suddenly, Cassie's eyes widened as she realized what I was trying to say. "That was when Lirem told you to take the blame for Elfangor giving us the power to morph, wasn't it? You - you mean they lied to your parents?"

^Yes,^ I answered. ^My father and mother think that it was I who broke the law of Seerow's Kindness.^

^Oh, Ax,^ Tobias said sympathetically. He was perched on Rachel's shoulder. ^What did they say?^

^My mother is clearly trying to understand. She wants to meet you. But my father . . . I thought that perhaps he would never be proud of me the way he was of Elfangor, but I never thought he would be ashamed of me. That he would have reason to be ashamed of me.^

"He has no reason to be ashamed. In fact, he has every reason to be proud. You are every bit the hero Elfangor was," Prince Jake told me.

^Thank you,^ I said, but I didn't quite believe him. ^Tobias, perhaps it would not be wise for us to tell them just yet.^

^Yeah, you're probably right. Are you ready for us to go in?^

^Yes,^ I lied. But we could have stood in the hallway for a year and I wouldn't have been ready. I opened the door and my friends followed me inside.

****Chapter Five -- Tobias****

Ax's parents were standing at the far end of the room. One of them, his mother, I assumed, because she was smaller and seemed to have a more feminine shape to her torso, was facing us. His father was turned away.

^Mother, Father,^ Ax said, sounding nervous. ^These are my human friends. Prince Jake, Cassie, Rachel, Marco, and Tobias.^

^Hello,^ his mother said. ^I am Forlay-Esgarrouth-Maheen, and this is my husband, Noorlin-Sirinial-Cooraf. We are very sorry for the loss of your planet.^ Ax's father - my grandfather, I realized with a shock - didn't move.

"So are we," Jake answered.

^You are somewhat famous on our homeworld. It's nice to be able to meet the humans who managed to hold the Yeerks off for so long.^ Ax' mother smiled at us with a strange Andalite smile.

"After knowing Ax for so long, it's nice to finally meet you, too," Cassie said, smiling back.

^Ax?^ his mother repeated, confused.

"Oh - Aximili," Cassie replied. "It's kinda hard for us to pronounce his full name, so we call him Ax."

^I see,^ Ax's mother said. There was an uncomfortable pause in the conversation. None of us knew what to say, and Ax's father's silence was very conspicuous.

At last, Ax said, ^Father, please. Say something. I know you are ashamed of me -^

^Yes, Aximili, I am ashamed of you,^ his father said, angrily turning to face us. ^You, an Andalite aristh, broke our most important law, the basis for everything we do. You gave these humans,^ he spat, as if "humans" was a dirty word, ^the ability to morph! You helped them and gave them information, despite strict orders not to! I don't want to hear excuses, because there are none! None!^ He glared at Ax. ^Forlay, we are leaving.^

^Noorlin, please,^ Ax's mother whispered. Her husband ignored her and started to walk out the door. Ax's mother hesitated for moment and then followed, touching Ax's hand as she walked by.

Before he left, Ax's father turned and looked his son in the eye. ^Aximili, you are a disgrace to your family. Your brother would never have done such a thing.^ With that, he left.

Ax leaned against the wall, as if he couldn't stand up by himself. "Ax," Cassie said, gently. "Everything will be fine. We'll tell them the truth . . ."

^No,^ Ax interrupted, sounded shaky, but firm. ^No, they must never know the truth.^

"Why?" Rachel demanded. "You're just gonna let yourself be humiliated and disgraced for something you didn't do? And come to think of it, why is everyone so pissed off anyway? I mean, you have that law to prevent a new race of Yeerks, but the five of us are obviously not going to become that. Why should you be punished?"

^Because I repeatedly broke a law. And they must never know the truth because it is either I who am disgraced or my brother's memory. And I will not allow that.^

^We understand, but, Ax, think about the consequences!^ I said frantically.

^I have,^ he replied. ^If anyone asks, I gave you the morphing capability.^

****Chapter Six -- Cassie****

Soon after Ax's parents left, we were transported to a different part of the base. Once again, we were given three rooms, slightly larger than the ones we'd had on the ship, and told to remain there until we appeared before the Council.

Poor Ax was in a daze. The first night, he spent two hours just

staring out the window. He was crushed, and nothing we said seemed to make him feel better.

Our hearing in front of the Council was in two days. The next morning, Jake came to see me after breakfast. (We'd been eating something grayish blue ever since the Dome ship picked us up. I think it was some sort of universal nutrient supplement. It wasn't fantastic, but it wasn't bad either. Marco's quote: "Not as good as a hamburger, but better than Spam.")

"What do you think we should do at this hearing?" Jake asked me. We were sitting on the floor in the room I was sharing with Rachel.

"I don't know," I replied helplessly. I leaned my head on his shoulder. "I know Ax asked us to lie, but I just hate the thought of doing that. I mean, he's giving up everything to protect his brother's memory."

"I know," Jake said. "I feel the same way."

"Have you talked to him?"

"I've tried, but he won't listen." He shook his head.

For awhile, neither of us said anything. It was the first time we'd been alone since we left Earth. Finally, he took my hand and squeezed it.

"How are you doing?" he asked me softly.

"Okay," I answered. "Sometimes I almost forget what's happened and I start thinking stuff like, I'd better get home before dark or Mom will be mad." I sighed. "How about you, Jake? You've been taking care of the rest of us, but no one's really asked how you're feeling."

"I'm okay, too," Jake got up and stared out the small window. "You know, this planet isn't so different from Earth." I stood next to him and looked out.

"I guess," I replied. I didn't quite agree.

"I mean, the grass is a little bluer than ours, and the sky's red and gold instead of blue, and there isn't as much ocean, and most of the animals have six legs instead of four - but overall, there's really not that much of a difference." I didn't answer. For the umpteenth time in the past three weeks, I sadly wondered what was happening back home. Were our families still alive? Did they know what had happened to us? Was anyone still free or were they all Controllers?

"Jake," I whispered. "Do you think our families - do you think they blame us for losing Earth?"

Jake didn't answer. He pulled me close and kissed my forehead. "I don't know," he finally murmured in my ear. "Maybe we'll never know. But we did our best."

"I know. But sometimes I wonder if there wasn't something else we could have done . . ." I turned my head and rested it on his chest as

I looked out the window. A six winged bird flew by. What had Ax called it that one time? A kafit bird? I smiled. Except for the extra set of wings, it actually looked a little like an eagle. Maybe Jake is right, I thought. Maybe when you get right down to it, the Andalite world isn't that different from Earth.

I was startled out of my thoughts as I felt Jake's arms tighten around me. He kissed my forehead again. "Cassie," he whispered. I looked up at him. He tilted my chin up with his hand and kissed my mouth softly as he slowly ran his fingers through my hair. I closed my eyes and kissed him back.

****Chapter Seven -- Aximili****

My father's words had devastated me. I tried not to show it, but my friends knew. Especially Tobias and Cassie. Tobias, in addition to being my "nephew," is my shorm. Cassie is simply a very emotional person herself, and generally quite good at reading other's emotions.

I would never be the hero that Elfangor was. Even if by some miracle I was allowed to continue with my training, my father would never look at me with respect or pride. I was certain of that.

The night before the hearing, Captain Kalainth came to see us. My friends and I gathered in Prince Jake and Marco's room.

^Are you ready for the hearing?^ the captain asked.

"I guess so," Prince Jake replied uncertainly, glancing at me. I aimed all four eyes away.

^Who will be speaking?^ I asked.

^Lirem and the six of you. I will also be addressing the Council, giving recommendations since I know the five humans better than any other Andalite - with the exception, of course, of Aximili.^

^Will my parents be there?^ I asked.

^I assume so,^ Captain Kalainth answered. ^They won't be addressing the Council, but they will most likely be observing.^ I nodded.

^You will be taken to the Council's meeting hall in the morning. Do you have any questions?^ No one did. ^Good night then. I will see you tomorrow.^ The captain left.

^Ax, what are you going to do?^ Tobias asked.

^What I was ordered to do,^ I replied bitterly. ^Lie. And you will do the same. Tomorrow, when you are questioned, you are to never have met Prince Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamtul in an abandoned construction site. You met me and I gave you the morphing capability. The Dome ship crashed into the ocean and I morphed a sea creature and swam ashore. The five of you were walking by and saw me. Tobias, say nothing of your relationship to Elfangor. You never met him.^ I looked each of them in the eyes as I said this.

I turned and walked out the door before my friends could see the pain

in my eyes.

To be continued . . .

3. Part Three: The Trial

****The After-Earth Chronicles****

The Trial****

****Chapter One -- Rachel****

"Mom!" I screamed. I could hear them yelling, screaming, begging with the Hork Bajir guards. I ran down the gray stone hallway as fast as I could. But it was long, so long, and I was so tired. I slowed down and leaned against the wall, gasping for air. But as I was about to give up, I heard Sara scream, "Rachel!" Abruptly, my head came up. "No!" I yelled. They would not get my family. Never.

Suddenly the hallway ended. Just stopped, even though moments before there had been at least another two miles of cold, wet walls in front of me.

I could see the Yeerk pool from above. The huge, pulsating, squirming mass of slugs in the gray pool. The cages for the involuntary hosts, most of whom were screaming and crying at the Hork-Bajir guards and the Taxxons that walked by and hissed at them. A group of voluntary hosts, standing around a television, laughing at the show they were watching. The long piers that extended out over the pool. The Hork-Bajir guards hustling screaming Controllers off one pier and dragging them down the other. And I could see my little sister Sara, struggling futilely against a guard as he shoved her head toward the sludge.

"Sara," I screamed. A Hork Bajir guard spotted me and aimed his Dracon beam. The laser sliced through the air toward me . . .

"Rachel, Rachel! Wake up!" My eyes snapped open. Cassie was bending over me, shaking me awake.

"Wha - Cassie?" I mumbled groggily.

"It's okay, Rachel. You were having a nightmare." I sat up, breathing hard.

"A nightmare," I repeated. Just a nightmare, I told myself. "Thanks, Cassie." I started to lie back down.

"Hold on. Don't go back to sleep. Jake just knocked on the door and told us to get up and get ready. The Council's gonna send for us in about a half an hour."

I groaned. The nightmare about the Yeerk pool wasn't the first one I'd had that night, so I hadn't slept very well. I sighed and rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. Then I stood up to look out the window. What I saw made me stop short. I drew in my breath sharply. "Whoa," I muttered in awe.

Cassie smiled. "Gorgeous, isn't it? I saw it yesterday morning. Nothing like it on Earth, that's for sure."

Earth sunrises are beautiful. Andalite sunrises are strange and spectacular. Absolutely fantastic. I know I don't sound like me at all, making a big deal about something like this. But really, it was just amazing.

Mostly, the sky was a combination of deep red and a shining gold. But there were still a few stars out, and remnants of the blue night sky lingered. Purple and green streaks leapt across the horizon. Every color you could imagine was somewhere in that sky. And strangest of all were the two moons that hung overhead, still glowing slightly.

Cassie and I stood there for awhile, watching as more and of the sky became red and gold. Suddenly there was an obnoxious pounding at the door.

"HEY, GIRLS! Get your butts outta bed!"

Marco.

Ugh. It way too early to listen to him.

I opened my mouth to deliver a scathing response, but Cassie beat me to it. "We're coming, Marco!" she called back.

"Fifteen minutes," he answered.

"Give him a break," Cassie told me once Marco's footsteps had faded.

"Why?" I asked. "I mean, we've lost everything normal. Why shouldn't Marco and I bicker, just like we always did?"

Cassie sighed. "I really don't get it."

"No," I replied. "You're much too nice to get it."

She smiled and shook her head. "C'mon, let's get dressed. We only have fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes to do what?" I asked. "It's not like we have major wardrobe decisions to make. I mean, which do you prefer - the rumpled shirt with the hole in the sleeve and the crinkled pants or the wrinkled pants and the white shirt with the gray-goop stain on it?" I held up my two "outfits" in disgust. Good grief. Me, Rachel, Ms. Fashion, had been relegated to choosing between a hole and a stain to wear before the highest governing body on my current planet.

"Just put something on," Cassie said, exasperated. "Andalites don't even wear clothes, so I doubt it will make a difference." She was wearing jeans and a green shirt with both a tear in the collar and a small gray-goop stain.

"Okay, okay," I grumbled reluctantly. I got dressed. "I don't believe this," I mumbled, looking down at myself. "If we were home, I wouldn't be caught dead wearing this. Both of these shirts would be in the garbage and these pants would be seeing the underside of a hot

iron."

Cassie just shook her head. "Well, in case you've forgotten, we aren't home. Things have kinda changed." She looked out the window at the red and gold sky and bit her lip.

"I know, I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to . . . look, I guess I'm just trying to keep things as normal as possible. Marco probably is, too, you know? Sometimes I'm not real good at dealing with emotion."

"I know. Let's just go," Cassie said, sounding strange, like she was a little mad at me.

The others were waiting in the hallway. Tobias was in his human form, wearing clothes that were too big for him. Jake must have lent him stuff. Ax was Ax, standing off to one side, staring at the ground and swaying slightly.

"About time," Marco said. "You know, when you only have two sets of clothes to choose from, dressing really shouldn't take that long."

I glared at him. "Oh, stuff it, Marco." Neither of us seemed to be feeling particularly creative in our insults that morning.

Jake smiled tolerantly. "Enough. We've got a rough day ahead, and it'll be easier if we don't have to listen to the two of you go at it the whole time." He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Ax?" he said carefully. Ax didn't answer. "AX," he repeated, louder.

^I'm sorry, Prince Jake,^ Ax finally answered, sounding tired.

"What's going on? Is the Council going to send someone to get us or what?"

^I believe so,^ Ax replied.

"Ax-man, have you thought any more about what you said last night?" Tobias asked. "If you've changed your mind, we'll understand."

^No,^ Ax said firmly. ^My brother was a great hero. I will not see his honor defaced.^

"But Ax . . ." Cassie began, taking his arm. He looked at her.

^Please,^ he said quietly, sounding almost as if he were begging. ^Do not make this any more difficult than it already is.^

****Chapter Two -- Aximili****

The Council sent a messenger to escort my friends and I to the Council's hall. I didn't speak as we walked, though my friends were chattering nervously among themselves. I had said enough.

The Council, as I said, meets in a hall, though it is more like a building, one of the few true buildings on my planet. It is very

large and very imposing, especially if one has not seen it before and is already nervous.

"Wow," Cassie said, halting abruptly. "It's so . . . so . . ." She trailed off, eyes wide.

"Big?" supplied Tobias, staring.

There was an awed pause as my friends took in the grandeur of the Hall of the Council, as it is formally known. I suddenly felt sick to my stomach as I realized that I had only a few minutes before my fate was sealed.

"Oh, come on, you guys," Rachel finally said. "It's just a building. Like . . . like the White House. I mean, big deal." She smiled mischievously at Marco. "Let's do it."

"Oh, god, we're doomed," Marco moaned, putting his head in his hands.

The messenger, who had been politely ignoring us, now led us into the hall and into a side room. ^Remain here, please,^ he said. ^The Council will see you shortly.^ He left.

"You, know," Marco began. "Is it just me or are people always telling us to 'stay?' 'Stay in your quarters until we send for you.' 'Stay in your room until we send for you.' And now, 'Stay in here until the Council is ready to see you.' I feel like I should be getting some sort of dog biscuit."

"Marco? Shut up," Rachel sighed.

We waited in the room for approximately fifteen minutes. For the most part, we were silent. Finally, the door opened, and the messenger said, ^Aximili, you and the humans may now speak to the Council.^ I followed him into the main room. I was surprised to find that I was no longer frightened, but instead felt impatient. Now that I was here, I just wanted to be finished with it. It was the waiting I could no longer tolerate.

My friends and I stood in a line facing a tall table. The Council would stand behind the table while questioning us. To our right were the spectators - my parents, I noted with dread. My father avoided looking at me.

Suddenly, a loud thought-speak voice announced, ^The honorable Andalite Council is now in session!^ The Council members filed in.

There are seven members of the Andalite Council - six regular members and the Head of the Council. They are older Andalites, all with many years of military service. They are almost revered by my people. Their decisions are final, and, as far as I knew, no one had ever questioned one of their rulings. I didn't know what would happen if someone did.

Lirem-Arrepoth-Terrouss, the Head of the Council, stood in the center of the long table. ^We are now in session to discuss the circumstances of aristh Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill and the humans of planet Earth. First, however, we would like to hear War-Prince

Kalainth-Gallinia-Serroth's report on Earth's status.^

Captain Kalainth stepped forward. ^I'm afraid the Yeerks have overtaken Earth. The five humans you see before you are most likely the only free humans left in all the galaxy.^

^And how did you come in contact with them?^

^Sir, I was sent to Earth as captain of a Dome ship. Our preliminary scouting expeditions showed that the Yeerks were extremely close to completely dominating the planet. We knew that there was at least on Andalite on Earth, because Aximili had contacted the homeworld once, years ago. We sent a thought-speak message to him using a long-range communicator, giving him instructions for him to meet us at a specific time and location. When we arrive, he was accompanied by these five humans. Naturally, we could not simply abandon them to the Yeerks, so they, too, boarded our ship.^

^I see,^ Lirem said. He narrowed his eyes. ^And these are the humans who possess the ability to morph?^

^Yes.^

^Thank you, War-Prince. We have received your recommendations. That is all for now.^ Captain Kalainth stepped back.

^Now, humans, if you will give us your names, please.^

"Yes, sir," Prince Jake said. "I'm Jake _____, this is Rachel _____, Marco _____, Tobias _____, and Cassie _____."

^Thank you.^ Lirem consulted with the Andalite next to him for a moment.

Finally, he raised his head. ^Next, the Council wishes to question aristh Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill.^

****Chapter Three -- Aximili****

I froze. It came so fast, the moment I dreaded. And I quickly discovered that I was no longer calm, no longer feeling impatient. I wanted time to stop.

"It's okay, Ax," Cassie whispered. "We're all behind you." I slowly walked into the center of the room and faced the Council. I held my head high and my tail rigidly off the ground, but my insides were quivering and my head was spinning. I turned one stalk eye toward my friends and saw Tobias nod at me. I turned the stalk eye back around so I was completely focused on the Council.

Lirem began. ^Hello, Aximili. Welcome home.^

^Thank you, sir,^ I replied.

^Are you ready to begin?^

NO! my mind screamed. ^Yes,^ I answered calmly, ignoring the fact that all three of my hearts were pounding and I could hear my pulse throbbing in my ears.

^Good. Tell us, Aximili, how long were you on Earth?^

^Approximately five Earth years.^

^And were there any other Andalites with you?^

Why was he asking me these questions? I wondered. He knew the answers. But then it occurred to me that perhaps the other Council members had not heard everything.

^No, sir. I was the only Andalite on planet Earth. With the exception, of course, of the Abomination.^

^Yes. And how did you come to meet these humans?^

^Approximately five Earth years ago, I was stationed on the Dome ship GalaxyTree. It was a scout vessel sent to investigate the situation on Earth. Unknown to us, there was a Blade ship in Earth's atmosphere. The Yeerks engaged us in battle and we lost. I was the only aristh on the ship, so I was sent to the Dome while the warriors and princes fought. In the course of the battle, the Dome was detached and landed in one of Earth's oceans. I acquired a sea creature and swam ashore. These humans happened to be walking by and saw me demorph.^

^I see. Your brother, Prince Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamtul, he was also stationed on board the GalaxyTree, was he not?^

^Yes, sir, he was.^

^What happened to him?^

^My brother was killed in battle by Visser Three. He died an honorable death, as a warrior.^

^My condolences. Have you avenged your brother's death, as our custom requires?^

^No, sir. I have attempted to do so and failed.^ Another strike against me. I could not bear the weight of my father's gaze.

Lirem looked at me intensely. I returned the stare, fighting the almost overwhelming urge to look away. ^Aximili,^ he finally said, slowly. ^War-Prince Kalainth has said that these are the humans who have the ability to morph. Can you confirm this?^

^Yes.^

^How did they come to possess this capability? To my knowledge, humans do not morph naturally, and they are too scientifically primitive to have developed the technology.^

I was silent. My mind formed the words, but I couldn't find the will to say them. ^Aximili?^ Lirem asked.

^I gave them the power.^ Five words. I counted them in my head. Five little words and my fate was sealed.

^I'm sorry?^ Lirem said, asking me to repeat myself.

^You heard me,^ I said sharply. ^I gave the humans the power to morph. The sea creature I morphed had a very large mouth. I was afraid the Yeerks would find the Escafil Device, which would have been disastrous, so I took it with me when I went ashore. When the humans saw me, I gave them the power.^

There was a stunned silence. I knew that everyone in the room had known what I would say, but it was shocking for them nonetheless.

After an eternity, Lirem said, ^Aximili, are you aware of the Law of Seerow's Kindness?^

^Yes, sir.^

^What is it, specifically?^

Why was he torturing me? I thought bitterly. ^The Law of Seerow's Kindness forbids Andalites from transferring technology and information to other species. It was enacted after the transfer of space travel technology to the Yeerks resulted in the current war.^

^Exactly. In your opinion, Aximili, is the act of you giving the humans the ability to morph in violation of this law?^

^Yes.^ I was already disgraced. Better not to appear stupid as well.

^I agree. However, I believe I forgave this transgression already, many years ago.^

^Yes.^

^So, Aximili, I now ask you a very, very important question. After we spoke, after I forgave you for breaking the Law of Seerow's Kindness, did you continue to break it? Did you give the humans additional information?^

I straightened up. This part was true, I was proud of it, and since I was already disgraced I might as well have my pride. ^Yes, sir, I did. I helped the humans in every way possible. I fought with them and gave them all the information I could. I told them the reasons for the war. They are very much aware of why we fight the Yeerks.^

^But you knew that you were breaking our most important law, not to mention disobeying the orders I gave you when we spoke,^ Lirem said loudly.

^Yes. What's more, I am proud to have broken that law. And if I were given the chance to change everything, I would not.^

^You have nothing to say in your defense?^ another Council member said in disbelief.

^Nothing, sir.^

^Then you are finished.^ Lirem's words carried a double meaning. ^We

will take a short break now. When we return, we will speak to the human named Jake.^ The Council members filed out. My parents left as well, through a side door. My mother looked at me sadly, but my father didn't even acknowledge my presence.

"I need to demorph," Tobias said the moment everyone had left.

^Oh - yes, you do. You have only five minutes left.^ Tobias was changing quickly.

Cassie put her arms around my shoulders for a moment. "Weren't you nervous?" she asked after she let me go.

^Nervous?^ I repeated, laughing. ^I was very nervous."

"We couldn't tell," Rachel said, smiling. Tobias, in his hawk form, looked at me. He'd known how nervous I was.

"I'm up next," Prince Jake sighed. "Ax . . . I really hate lying like this. Are you sure?"

^Yes,^ I said. ^Just remember the story I told.^ Now that my questioning was over, I felt relief and nothing more. My part was over.

Rachel shook her head. "I just don't understand it, Ax. When we were on Earth, everything was all about honor for you. And now, you don't seem to care!"

^I don't seem as if I care!^ I said incredulously. ^Of course I care! Do you have any conception of how difficult this is for me?^ I shook my head. ^But my brother was far more honorable than I could ever hope to be . . . and for the sake of preserving that honor in the eyes of my people, I am sacrificing my own. The people need heroes like Elfangor.^

^But, Ax, you're a hero, too,^ Tobias said. He was starting to remorph, but hadn't yet crossed into spoken speech.

^No, even if I were to admit the truth, I would still be punished for giving you help after I was specifically ordered not to.^ I shook my head. ^No, it is better for Elfangor's memory to be left unscathed.^

"All right, Ax," Prince Jake said reluctantly. "If that's what you really want."

I nodded. ^Yes.^

A few minutes later, the Council came back in and called Prince Jake.

****Chapter Four -- Jake****

^State your name, please,^ Lirem said.

"Jake _____."

^And you are a human?^

"The last time I checked."

The Head of the Council - what had Ax called him? Lirem? - looked very confused. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Marco smirking.

^Uh, sir, that was just a bit of human humor,^ Ax said quickly.

^Ah, yes, humor. Well, we'll have none of that here, Jake. This is the Hall of the Council, and we must maintain the proper dignity.^

"Yes, sir," I said meekly. "I'm sorry."

^It's all right. Now, Jake. Can you tell me how you and your friends met Aximili?^

I looked at him, puzzled. "But Ax already told you."

^Who?^

"Ax. Oh, you see, Aximili's whole name is a little hard to pronounce using our mouths and spoken speech, so we call him Ax for short."

^I see,^ Lirem said. ^Nevertheless, I would appreciate your version.^

"Okay." I looked at Ax over my shoulder. He was staring at me, a determined look in his eyes. I turned back. "Cassie, Marco, Rachel, Tobias, and I met Ax when we saw him swim up on shore. We were walking along the beach and saw a shark - that's sort of a really big fish - swim up on shore. I guess Ax didn't see us watching him, so he kept morphing, and by the time he did see us, it was too late."

^And then what happened?^

"Ax came out of the water and told us what was happening - we hadn't known about the Yeerks up until then - and . . ." I stopped.

^Yes?^ Lirem prompted.

I hesitated. ^Say it!^ Ax snapped in private thought-speak. I was surprised. He had never, in five years, snapped at me before. ^Just say it, Prince Jake,^ he said, sounding tired and defeated..

"And - and then he gave us the power to morph," I finished with a sigh.

^I see. And you continued to fight with Aximili?^

"Yes, for almost five years."

^I must admit, that is commendable, considering there were only six of you against the entire Yeerk empire.^

"Thanks, but we would have lost a long time ago without Ax."

^Hmm.^ This didn't seem to please Lirem. ^Then, you agree that he gave you additional help?^

"Yes," I replied reluctantly.

^Thank you, Jake. That is all.^ I stepped back.

Lirem conferred with the other Council members for a few moments. Then he said, ^We do not see the need to call all six of you forward. Very simply, do the rest of you agree with what Aximili and Jake have said?^

The others looked at each other. "Yes," Marco finally said. Cassie and Tobias both followed, each looking very unwilling.

Rachel was looking at Ax hard, obviously trying to argue with him. But in the end, she gave in. "Yes," she mumbled, shaking her head slightly.

^Good. Then we will adjourn until tomorrow to give the Council time to consider the recommendations of War-Prince Kalainth, as well as what has been said today. Humans and Aximili, you will be escorted back to your rooms.^

****Chapter Five -- Tobias****

After we got back to our rooms, Ax kinda went off by himself. I mean, we couldn't actually go anywhere, but he stood off in a corner of our room, and wouldn't talk to me, so he might as well have been someplace else.

I went to go find Rachel. We hadn't had much chance to talk, but I knew she was feeling strange, so I morphed to human and went to find her.

She was in the room she shared with Cassie, alone. I knocked on the door. "Come in, Tobias," she answered. I opened the door.

"How did you know it was me?" I asked.

"Three ways - your footsteps, your knock, and the fact that I was pretty sure you would be coming by this afternoon." She smiled at me, that gorgeous smile that always made me melt. I sat next to her on the floor.

"How are you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Why are you guys always asking me that? I'm fine. I'm not a porcelain doll. I won't break. I can handle this. Besides, you're the one everyone should be worrying about."

I sighed. "I don't want you to worry about me."

"Well, tough. 'Cause I do. I love you, you know?"

I smiled at her and pulled her close. "I know," I whispered, gently playing with piece of her golden hair. "I love you, too."

We were silent for awhile, but it was a good silence. I held her and

she leaned her head against my shoulder. "What do you think the Council will decide?" she finally murmured, breaking the silence.

"Who knows?" I answered. "I sure don't."

"What about Ax?"

"Ax won't even talk to me," I said, feeling frustrated.

"I just don't understand it," Rachel said. She sat up. "Ax should be treated like a hero, and instead he's being put on trial."

"I know, I feel the same way. But this isn't our planet, you know. Things are done differently here."

"I guess. But it's still not right."

"No," I agreed. We fell back into silence.

We were both startled by a knock at the door. "Who is it?" Rachel called as we sprung apart.

^Guard,^ an unfamiliar thought-speak voice answered. ^There is someone here to see Tobias _____.^ Startled, I got up and opened the door.

"I'm Tobias," I said. "Who wants to see me?"

^Forlay-Esgarrouth-Maheen,^ the guard replied shortly. ^Come with me.^ I glanced at Rachel, who shrugged. I followed the guard.

****Chapter Six -- Tobias****

Ax's mother was waiting in a small room just down the hall. The guard let me in and then left.

^Hello, Tobias,^ she said quietly.

"Hi," I answered, unsure of what to call her.

^You may call me Forlay,^ she told me, as if she'd read my mind.

"Um, okay. Why - why did you want to see me?" I asked.

^I wanted to see you because I want the truth.^

"The - the truth," I stammered. "What do you mean?"

^What was said today in the Hall of the Council - that was all a lie, was it not? Aximili may have helped you fight the Yeerks, but he did not give you the ability to morph.^

I was shocked. How could she have known? I knew Ax wouldn't want me to tell her the truth, but she was so certain of it. I was sure that if I lied, she would know I wasn't telling the truth.

"Yes," I answered. "Yes, it was a lie. But how? How did you know?"

^I have raised two sons,^ she answered. ^I knew Elfangor very well. And I know Aximili just as well. He has been greatly changed by his time on Earth, but not so much that I cannot tell when he is lying. And the five of you were very hesitant in agreeing with his story.^

I nodded. "You're right. Ax didn't give us the power to morph. It - it was someone else."

^Elfangor.^ It was so sudden, I almost fell over. And it wasn't even a question! There was no hesitation whatsoever in her voice. Just a plain statement.

"How did you know?" I blurted, stunned.

She smiled sadly with her eyes. ^He is the only person Aximili would put above his honor, which is the most important thing to an Andalite warrior.^

I nodded again. "Yes, it was Elfangor."

^How did it happen?^

"My friends and I - were walking home late one night when we saw his fighter crash. He came out and saw us. He was badly injured, dying, and wanted us to have a chance against the Yeerks. So he brought out the blue box - the Escafil device - and gave us the power to morph. Then . . ." I looked away. I didn't want to tell her what had happened then.

^What? Please tell me.^

I sighed, still not looking at her. "Visser Three came. He landed and attacked Elfangor while we hid. He fought to the very end, Forlay. He died a warrior's death, which is the way he would have wanted it." I took a deep breath. "A few weeks later, Cassie and I began having dreams about the ocean, about a voice calling to us. We went to investigate, and that's when we found Ax."

At last, I looked at Forlay. She was staring at me strangely. ^Thank you,^ she finally said. ^I'm sorry to have bothered you. But I wanted the truth, and I felt something from you . . . I can't explain it.^

"There's one other thing," I said as she started to leave. My voice was cracking, tears threatening my eyes. "A few months later, we found something else out . . . or, rather, I found something else out."

She turned back. ^What?^

I took another deep breath. "I found out that years ago, Elfangor had been on Earth. Actually, he was on Earth for a long time, as a human nothlit. He was there long enough to marry and have a child - a son." I looked at her. "Me."

It was her turn to be stunned. ^Impossible,^ she said, but I could

tell she believed me. ^How? At present, there is no cure for nothlits.^

"I know." I began to demorph. "I am one," I said, just before my beak shot out of my mouth. ^I've been one since my very first battle. But there is a way out. The Ellimist gave me back the power to morph. And he took Elfangor off Earth and sent him back into battle. I never had a father, not a real one, anyway, because he was forced to leave before I was born.^

Forlay was staring at me, shocked. ^That is your natural form?^

^Yes,^ I answered, fully demorphed. ^A red-tailed hawk.^

^You are my grandson.^

^Yeah. It's a strange universe, isn't it?^ I remarked with a thought-speak laugh.

^It certainly is. I - I will see you tomorrow, Tobias.^

^Yeah. 'Bye.^

^Good-bye.^

Forlay left, I remorphed, and the guard escorted back to our rooms. What, if anything, should I tell Ax? I wondered.

As it turned out, my problem was solved for me. I went into the room I shared with him, and found myself looking at him straight in the face. ^Why did my mother want to see you?^ Ax demanded.

"What?! How'd you know?!"

^I heard the guard. What did she want?^

I stepped back. "She wanted the truth."

^What?!^ Ax gasped.

"She knew, Ax," I said, shaking my head in disbelief. "She didn't just suspect, she knew. And she didn't just know you were lying, she knew you were lying to protect Elfangor."

^How?^ Ax asked in amazement.

"She could tell you were lying. And she knew the only person you would go so far to protect is Elfangor."

^What did you tell her?^

"Everything," I replied. I looked him in the eye. "Everything," I repeated.

^Even . . . even that Elfangor was your father?^

"Even that." I shrugged. "She seemed to take it pretty well, considering."

^My father,^ Ax said. ^He will not be as open.^

"Maybe not," I agreed. Ax didn't say anything, just looked out the window.

****Chapter Seven -- Aximili****

The next morning we were escorted once more to the Hall of the Council. As we filed in, I looked at the spectators' area. My father and mother were there again, my mother looking at me and my father still ignoring my presence. I wondered why he even bothered to come.

The Council members came in promptly, looking as if they had business they wanted to be finished with. As they did, I looked at my mother and sent her a private thought-speak message.

^Mother, no matter what the punishment is, you must not say anything. For Elfangor's sake.^ She didn't reply.

Lirem called for attention and did not waste time. ^The Council has reached its decision. In the issue of what to do with the humans, we have decided to follow the recommendations of Captain Kalianth. In the matter of Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill and the charge of breaking the Law of Seerow's Kindness, we find him . . . guilty. Aximili, you are to be stripped of your rank as an aristh, and we deny War-Prince Kalianth's recommendation that you be made a full warrior.^

I couldn't breathe. I wanted to die. I had expected it, and tried to prepare myself for it, but nothing could have prepared me for the feelings of humiliation and disgrace that were washing over me. I felt physically ill. If I had been in human morph, I most likely would have vomited.

^No!^ I heard my mother cry. I watched in a daze as she rushed from the spectators' area and stood in front of the Council.

^Forlay!^ I heard my father shout angrily.

^Mother, no!^ I managed to say. But she ignored both of us.

^No, you cannot do this,^ my mother pleaded. ^It was not Aximili who gave the humans the capability to morph.^

^It wasn't?^ one of the other Council members said. ^Who was it then?^

^Prince Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamtul,^ my mother said.

^Mother,^ I gasped. ^No!^

^Aximili, your brother is dead,^ my mother said, turning to face me. ^I have already lost one son. I will not lose you also.^

^Aximili, is this true?^ one of the Council members asked me.

I nodded. ^Yes, sir.^ Using one of my stalk eyes, I saw my friends nod, agreeing with me.

^You lied then. You all lied.^ The Council looked at my friends and

me in disapproval. It was not against the law to lie to the Council, mostly because it had never needed to be. As far as I know, no one had dared to lie to them before my friends and I did.

^Sir, the reason I lied was . . .^ I held Lirem's gaze for a moment. He had ordered me to lie, but the other Council members had obviously not known that. If I told what had actually happened, it was very possible he would lose his position. ^The reason I lied was . . . to protect my brother's memory.^

^I see,^ Lirem said, a note of relief in his voice. ^This certainly changes the situation. The Council wishes for a short break to discuss these developments. Please do not leave the room.^ The Council filed out.

Prince Jake and the others began talking, relief in their voices now that their ordeal was over. Meanwhile, I tried to decipher my emotions. I was relieved that I had one chance left, but at the same time I was angry with my mother for putting me over Elfangor. I knew why she had done it - as long as my father thought I had broken the law to give my friends the power to morph, there was no chance of us being a family. But now, Elfangor's memory would be scarred forever.

The Council was not gone long. Within a few moments, they came back and called for attention.

^We have taken into account the new information, and have changed our ruling slightly. As before, we have decided to follow Captain Kalainth's recommendations in decided the fates of the humans. However, in light of the new information, our previous ruling on the charge against aristh Aximili has been deemed far too harsh. We have decided to deny War-Prince Kalianth's petition that Aximili be made a warrior, but we will allow him to keep his title of aristh and continue with his training.^

I uttered a mental sigh of relief. Tobias smiled at me and Cassie squeezed my hand.

It was over.

****Epilogue -- Aximili****

I trotted quickly down the long hallway of the Dome ship Tiger. My ship had docked with it just moments before.

I rounded a corner and stopped. ^War-Prince Jake,^ I said stiffly to the tall human standing in front of me.

"Prince Aximili," he replied, just as stiffly.

^What is your report?^ I asked.

The smile War-Prince Jake had been struggling to mask suddenly broke through. "A baby girl," he answered with a laugh. "A beautiful baby girl who is absolutely the image of her mother."

^Speaking of the mother, Cassie is well, I hope?^

"Very well, and eager to see you." I followed War-Prince Jake down

the hallway to his captain's quarters.

Cassie was lying in bed, looking exhausted, but very, very happy. She was holding a tiny human child, wrapped in a blanket.

"Hi, Ax," she said smiling.

^Hello,^ I replied. ^Congratulations.^

"Thanks." I squeezed her hand.

Just then, the ship's computer officer entered. "Hey, Ax-man, long time, no see. Jake, there's a call for you on the holographic communicator."

^Hello, Warrior Marco,^ I said.

"Ax, I really hate this warrior stuff. It's such a pain in the neck."

"Kinda like you, Marco?" Rachel's voice said. I swung my stalk eyes around to the holographic communication screen mounted on the wall.

Rachel and Tobias were facing us, smiling. Rachel was holding their own child. "Hi, everyone," she said. "Cassie, how're you feeling?"

"Great," Cassie answered. "Tired, but I'm absolutely thrilled."

"Boy or girl?" Tobias asked.

"Girl. We decided to name her Julie," Jake replied.

"What a beautiful name," Rachel said. She held up Sara, her and Tobias's child, whispering, "C'mon, Sara, say 'hi' to your new cousin." Sara opened her mouth and yawned. My friends laughed.

"So, Ax, Marco, how are you guys doing?" Tobias asked.

"Great," Marco replied.

^Fine, thank you,^ I answered.

After the trial, I went back into training along with Rachel and Jake. Cassie became a well-respected physician, and Tobias, who chose not to become a human nothlit, became a teacher. It was a surprise, but he did very well teaching a course on humans to young Andalites. Marco, after his training, joined the army as a computer officer. A few years later, Rachel and Tobias were married in a double ceremony with Prince Jake and Cassie. I was Tobias's best man, and Marco was Jake's.

I had feared that Elfangor's honor and memory would be tarnished in light of what was revealed during the trial. I needn't have worried. In time, my human friends became heroes in the eyes of my people also - and both Elfangor and I were completely forgiven. My father took more time, but eventually he seemed to accept what had happened. He died a short while ago, and I miss him greatly, but he was at peace

with me, and with Elfangor.

Earth is still under the control of the Yeerks, but our forces grow stronger. We are winning the war in many parts of the galaxy now. My friends and I look to the day when we can return and liberate Earth.

End
file.